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Title Imperialism

Imprint Chicago: 1899

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# IMPERIALISM

—BY—

WILLIAM M. SALTER

A Lecture before the Society for Radical Culture of Chicago, in Steinway Hall, February 12, 1890.



(REPRINTED FROM UNITY)

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FROM ANTI-IMPERIALIST LEADERS  
WASHINGTON, D. C.



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Three great issues have been before the American people within the last twelve months. The first was whether this nation should put an end to Spanish oppression in Cuba and set the island free. The second was whether, having broken the Spanish power in the Philippines, the nation should thereafter return the islands to Spain or turn them over to some other Power or leave them to themselves, in any case washing its own hands of them; or whether it should assume some manner of responsibility for them. The third issue is now before us. We have freed Cuba; we have accepted responsibility for the Philippines—and the question now is, how shall we discharge that responsibility, in what spirit shall we act, do we really wish to own the Philippines or do we wish to make them free?

Each one of these issues has tried, or is trying, keenly the temper of the people. Some thought in the first place that Cuba was no concern of ours—abhorred the war altogether. Later, many believed that we should do anything rather than charge ourselves with the Philippines—some, like Prof. Norton, even advocating leaving them to Spain. But the main body of the people was moved in both instances by

humaner, more generous thoughts. The nation has acted on the assumption that we were our brother's keeper—and even to islands in distant seas we have stretched out the friendly hand. The nation has assumed responsibility and has even agreed to pay Spain \$20,000,000 for a quit-claim deed to the islands. From a legal point of view the Philippines are in our hands.

And now an issue has arisen that entirely overshadows the earlier ones. It has not stood out clearly till now. When men have urged keeping control of the Philippines, they have been called Imperialists, or in any case Expansionists. But it may be that they were, and it may be they were not. It is possible to approve of both the war and the Paris treaty, and yet to be oposed to imperialism or expansion. Imperialism now first has a distinct signification—I mean, as related to a practical issue. Imperialism was not the issue a year ago; it was not the issue when the treaty was signed in Paris. Now it is the issue—do we believe in *forcible* expansion or not? For that is the meaning of imperialism, and that is the question now confronting the American people.

The events of the past week have been simply shocking; they have been humiliating to anyone who loved old-fashioned American ideas. But they have only brought home to everybody what the thoughtful and discerning already knew. This is that the Philippinos want freedom, just as the Cubans did, and the question is, have we broken the Spanish power over them to set them free, or to give them a new master? A people that does not care for freedom is perhaps not worth freeing, but the Philippinos have cared enough for freedom to make several unaided attempts at it during the century. Twelve times, despairing of a peaceful redress of grievances, they have risen in insurrection. They are naturally peaceful; according to General Merritt they are not natural and pertinacious fighters, like our Indians, but docile and amiable. Far away as they have been, we have known or heard little of them, but of the last revolutionary

uprising in 1896 we have distinct information. It had six separate objects :

(1) The expulsion of the monastic orders, who, even Catholic authorities admit, practiced fearful abuses.

(2) The abolition of the Governor General's arbitrary power to banish without accusation, trial or sentence.

(3) Restoration to the natives of lands held by the religious orders.

(4) A limitation of the arbitrary powers of the civil guard.

(5) No arrest without judge's warrant.

(6) Abolition of the fifteen days per annum compulsory labor.

These were hardly the demands of savages, either in moral or mind. The Philippinos are evidently human beings, in some respects not unlike ourselves. Indeed, while the bulk of them [I have in mind, particularly, Luzon, where are five out of the seven or eight million, making up the population of the islands] are uneducated and half-civilized, they have some of the marks of a superior people. They wish education. They are cleanly, are hospitable and obliging. They have a pleasing family life. Wives have an amount of liberty hardly equaled in any other Eastern country, and they seldom abuse it. The men are self-respecting and self-restrained to a remarkable degree. The climate allows them to be indolent, yet they possess many fine branches of industry (making beautiful mats and elegant linen fabrics), and they imitate such branches of European industry as shipbuilding, leather dressing and carriage building, with great success. With their patriarchal system of living, they have not learned the art of forming a state and are commonly supposed to be destitute of the capacity of governing themselves; yet the stress of circumstances has developed leaders among them and during the past year an attempt has been made to organize a government. For three centuries they

have been subject to Spanish rule, and it is absurd to deny the existence of capacities that have not been allowed to grow. What their capabilities are is shown in the nature and personnel and working of the extempore government they now have and which makes so much a part of the gravity of the present situation that I must give a few details.

Its seat is in Malolos, forty miles from Manila. There the Philippine Congress sits in an old Spanish church. It had eighty-three members when it declared the republic on the 16th of September last; more have since been added. Of these eighty-three, seventeen were graduates of European universities. The President studied at Madrid and Salamanca, taking degrees in theology and law, and is an author, his works on the life and manners of the inhabitants of Luzon having been translated into German. The head proper of the government is a man who had been, under Spanish rule, a petty governor of his native town, a landed proprietor and by no means an adventurer with all to gain and nothing to lose—Aguinaldo. Aguinaldo was the leader of the insurrection of 1896, and yet when the Spanish government agreed to make concessions and to pay the wages of the insurgent troops, he counseled peace and his counsel prevailed. (I may add that the insurgents disbanded and kept their agreement to the letter, while the Spanish government did nothing in the way of reforms and only paid a third of the money promised, and that the payment of this to Aguinaldo, the recognized representative of the insurgents\* constitutes the only basis I have been able to discover for the charge which our papers are making that he was a blackmailer and a bandit.) According to a writer in the *Review of Reviews*, who knew him, “friends and enemies agree that he is intelligent, ambitious, far-sighted, brave, self-controlled, honest, moral, vindictive and at times cruel.” His cruelty has been kept well in check, however, during the past year, for all accounts agree that he has been temperate in the use of his

\*See *Review of Reviews*, Feb., 1899, p. 108.

power and that his soldiers have treated their Spanish prisoners more humanely than the Spaniards used to treat the Philipinos who fell into their hands. His extraordinary ability as a military organizer are commonly admitted. Encouraged in part by our own representatives, he came from Hong Kong (where he had been since the insurrection of 1896) to Luzon, organized a native revolutionary army, was of incalculable advantage to our own military forces, captured something like 15,000 Spaniards, raised large sums of money ranging as high as \$200,000 a month, and under his leadership the Spanish dominion was practically confined to two towns, Manila in Luzon and Iloilo in Panay, Iloilo itself being afterward surrendered by the Spanish to him. The fact is that up to last Sunday American authority hardly extended beyond the walls of Manila City, the whole of the rest of Luzon, as well as some of the other islands being in the hands of the native government. This government sent an embassy to the Paris Peace Conference, setting forth that it embraced fifteen provinces and that in all of them good order and tranquility prevailed. An acknowledged authority on the Philippines, long a resident there, writes in a recent review that he has before him a list of the township presidents throughout Luzon, many of whom he has personally known for years.\* Since the government has obtained possession of Iloilo, law and order has equally prevailed there, according to the testimony of our own observers. The Philippine government sent a representative to Washington, whom our government refused to receive, though personally, and as he has conducted himself, no one has taken exception to him. But a short time since the Congress at Malolos passed a fresh vote of confidence in Aguinaldo and empowered him to declare war on America whenever he should deem it desirable. Grant that this government may not be an ideal government, grant that it may not act wisely, grant that it does not represent the whole people of the Philippines but only

\*John Foreman, *National Review*, Nov., '98, p. 308.

the more enterprising and progressive classes, none the less it is something, and I should think any lover of freedom, any old-fashioned American, would welcome it as a beginning and as prophetic of greater things that may some time come.

I started out by saying that the Philippinos wanted freedom and I have stated all these things to show what manner of people they were. And now the question is, Spain having transferred to us whatever title to the islands she possessed (and I am not sorry for it), no other nation having the right to interfere, what shall we do? Shall we proceed to enforce our title after the Spanish fashion, or shall we respect the instincts and aspirations for freedom of those dusky tribes, do all in our power to help perfect the independent political institutions that are already in their infancy, and defend them against any possible assault from without? It will not do to say that the Philippines are ours in the sense in which the territory between the Atlantic and the Pacific is ours. All we have is a quitclaim deed to them from Spain. We have whatever title Spain had. But what in the light of American ideas was that title worth? There is an old notion lying at the foundation of our political system that government derives its just powers from the consent of the governed. Without insisting on the literal and pedantic interpretation of that notion, its general meaning is plain. It is the charter of our liberty, the spiritual basis of American institutions. In the name of that idea and under its sacred sanction we flung ourselves into the Cuban war. Despite all low motives that intermingled, there was a note of idealism in our first pronouncement. We have not sinned against that idea (unless in the war with Mexico) till now; the constraining motive in our declaration to England about Venezuela was of this character—we will not have political freedom trenched upon on this continent, that was the meaning of it. Are we ready, is the American people ready to forget that idea now? Circumstances do alter cases; does it alter this case, or is it a principle

of the national life? The Monroe doctrine may be abandoned, though I think it has been rather extended than abandoned in the recent war (for the root principle of it is nothing else than concern for liberty); the wise counsels of the fathers, of even great Washington, may no longer be applicable; but is the Declaration of Independence simply a counsel or is it rather America's life blood? For my own part, I am in this case a conservative, for when the past is so fortunate as to have enunciated a principle, I know nothing else than to cling to it. Idealism and conservatism blend in one. Happy is that country that can look back as well as forward to something great. Many countries are glad to cover up their beginnings; think the blessed fates, we in America are in luckier stead.

Now, if the Philippinos wished to become a part of us, we should not sin against our great principle in incorporating them, however undesirable and politically inexpedient such a result might be, and the ratified treaty would leave the world nothing to say against it. We might have cherished this idea at the start, we might have thought that any subject people would be glad to come under the protection of our flag; but apparently we are mistaken, we are waking up to see that other peoples, even so-called inferior peoples, may have a desire to have their own political existence as truly as we did, now a hundred and more years ago. We are confronted with a situation in which we have a paper title to a people that after all does not wish to belong to us. If they were our own people as the South was, we might hold them even against their consent; but they are foreigners and outsiders to start with. We have absolutely no claim on them at all save the quitclaim title which Spain has given us, and what, after all, does that title amount to in the light of the facts of the past week, save permission to make a conquest of them? We hear much of expansion, of inevitable expansion, of the instinct to live and grow and expand itself which every great people

feels. Americans talk in this way as well as Englishmen and I will not deny that there is some truth in it; all I can say is that according to the American idea there are rightful limitations to the process and these limitations are set in the terms of the Declaration of Independence, and if we forget those limitations we become no better than the Roman Empire of old, and our republic is but a name. These limitations hold against a weak people as truly as against a strong one. The test of justice is in respecting the weak, and if justice is laid low it will lay us low in time. There is only one thing stronger than man or the strongest and most expansive nation, and that is the immortal laws, God.

This nation has had full warning of the dire events that have happened this past week. Ever since Dewey entered Manila Bay we could, if we had our ears to the ground, hear the murmurs and resolves of certain dark-skinned people that they would throw off a hated oppressor's yoke and would not bow meekly to a new master. There has been apparently much holding the ears to the ground to know what our people really wanted, but there has not been apparently much heeding of what even came over the wires from the distant East. We knew or could have known that conditions were ripe for a fresh insurrection, we knew or could have known that after Dewey's victory it began, we ourselves aiding and abetting, and in turn profiting by it. We supplied the insurgents with arms and ammunition; through our agent at Hong Kong we encouraged Aguinaldo to go back to Luzon, we even allowed them to think that we should favor Philippine independence; they innocently believed that we sympathized with them, that having set out to free the Cubans, we could not be indifferent to their own aspirations. They did not wish German aid and refused it when it was offered to them, but they were willing to be beholden to us—we the great liberty-loving power of the West. They would not seriously oppose a temporary American protectorate. All this appeared in their

formal statement to the American people, brought to this country by Agoncillo in September. Yes, as late as two months ago they recognized that such a protectorate would be necessary to them, as otherwise they would, with whatever government they might set up for themselves, sooner or later become the prey of some greedy Power. But gradually they have become skeptical of our intentions. They have been led to suspect that we after all want to own their islands, and who will deny with some reason? They claim that their shipping has been interfered with and arms and ammunition seized; they claim their taxes are under the American authorities increased and old custom house abuses continued. Three times they have tried, and tried in vain, to secure official recognition, through their representative, from the United States government. The United States will not declare what its future intentions are. It refuses to say that it will not hold the islands permanently. The President talks of "benevolent assimilation," and when a Senator assuming to speak for the administration announces that our duty is to be only temporary, there is a disavowal of the statement. Everything looks like expansion, peaceful expansion if possible, forcible expansion if necessary, but expansion in every case. The Philippinos scent imperialism, and they are right. Victory has intoxicated this people; the commercial spirit is seducing it, making it forget itself and leave the straight grand path it entered on a year ago. In a recent census of the newspapers of the country it was found that two-thirds of them were for a "forward policy"—and we know what that means. If the people move or if powerful interests move our Chief Magistrate, pure-minded and just-minded though he is, gives no sign that he will gainsay. To wait to know just how to act is legitimate: to wait for principles—what under heaven is that but to confess that we have no principles? Seeing that the nation has no mind on this new issue, this all-important, life and death issue to themselves, knowing full well that when conscience is not alive interests sweep men away, hear-

ing the ever bolder and bolder expressions of imperialist policy from our newspapers, magazines and public men, and finding that the main problem discussed among us is how to get the islands and yet not give the people rights, who can wonder that the Philippinos, victims of disillusionment, lost their patience and made up their minds to strike a blow before it should be forever too late? For my own part, I have no wonder and rather admire, though I pity their ignorance and folly. Poor Philippinos! What are they with their scanty equipment, with their pitiful bows and arrows, before the army and the navy of the United States! But they will soon learn better—or at least those who survive after our gallant attacks! After the bravest are winnowed out we shall no doubt have a docile, obedient population to rule over and "benevolently assimilate."

The responsibility for the disgraceful battles of the past week is commonly put on the Senators who opposed the treaty. There never was a more superficial opinion. The real responsibility lay with those who have refused to say a single clear word to the effect that we had no wish to govern the Philippines without their consent. One word even from the President alone to the effect that we viewed our offices as merely temporary, that ultimately we hoped the Philippines would be free even as Cuba is to be free, would have made the Philippinos our friends, would have made them not dream of opening hostilities upon us, would have made them gladly co-operate with us even as the Cubans are beginning to do in that long unhappy isle. Unless we are to embark on an imperialist policy, the slaughters on either side the past week are the sickliest, ghastliest waste that this war or any war has ever known. There is no honor for any American who fell on the plains near Manila in these engagements; there is no comfort for any desolate American home in the thought that the life was offered up for liberty or in any holy cause. If it was all waste there surely was no honor, and if it was necessary as a first step toward

imperialism, there was honor only as honor and shame are one, only as there can be honor in fighting to enslave men. As holy as was the war for Cuba, so unholy is this war against the Philippines. It is a black disgrace to America, it makes me hang my head in shame for my country. If I had thought of this outcome I would rather have had the Cubans starved and rotted out than that this people, with its proud history, with its glorious past, should sully itself with such dishonor. I know, of course, there was nothing for our soldiers to do but to fire back when they were fired upon, and I nowise reflect upon the personal bravery they may have shown. They were victims, not causes; but the damnable disgrace of this business is on ourselves that we have not known our mind, and on the highest in the land that they have not known their mind.

It is high time this country took the bull by the horns and decided whether it is for imperialism or against imperialism. Everyone who believes in the forcible subjection of the Philippines, everyone who believes in prosecuting the present war even for a day without an explicit declaration on our part that we have no designs on the liberty and independence of the Philippine people and mean ultimately to do for them only what we meant to do for Cuba, is an imperialist. He nowise differs from English imperialists, he nowise differs from those who went plundering the world (or approved of it) under a Roman emperor; the essence of imperialism is disregard of liberty. Those, on the other hand, who believe in liberty, who oppose conquest, are the anti-imperialists. It is not a question of how much territory we shall have, but of how it shall be acquired. It is not a question of favoring war or of opposing war, but of what we have to say to a specific kind of war. . It is not a question of seeking new markets for American trade, or of being content with the markets we already have, but of what we are willing to do to get new markets. One thing at a time, and the

nation needs to clearly envisage this question at the present moment.

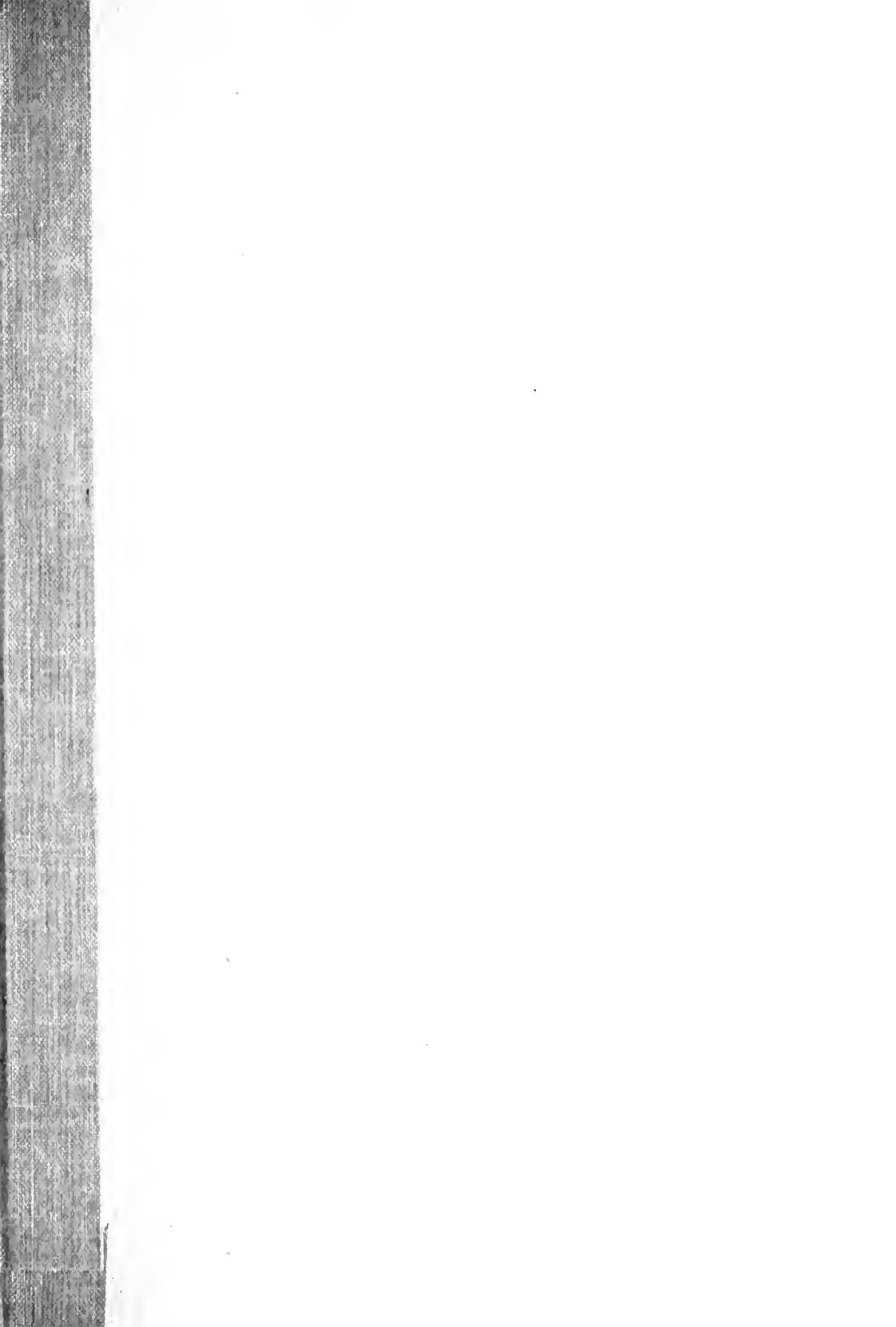
Already there has been a relaxing of old sentiments. Even Mr. Blaine opposed the right of conquest. He induced the Pan-American Congress to distinctly say that the principle of conquest should not be recognized as admissible under American public law, and that all cessions of territory made under threats of war or the pressure of an armed force should be void. I fear that there are many who would not find that this expresses their sentiments now. President McKinley said in the case of Cuba that "forcible annexation cannot be thought of," that it would by our code of morals be "criminal aggression"; but how many would say it now with reference to the Philippines? Would our Chief Magistrate himself say it? It is not a moment too early to face this question and to settle it. It is now that we are at a real parting of the ways. Let us maintain our authority if we will in the Philippines, though we have only ourselves to thank that we must do this at such fearful cost, but let us say without further delay what our end and object is in asserting our authority. The whole future development of America turns on how we answer this question. If we go on one way, we shall simply add America to the list of the Powers, of which the world has too many already that are unscrupulous foes of the liberty of man, and we shall do so without the excuse which old crowded Europe may plead for itself, do it in a kind of wantonness and speculative fever. And since we shall be learning contempt of liberty abroad, it will be harder to keep respect for liberty at home. Little by little individual rights, which it has been our glory to defend, will come to be regarded as indifferent matters. If on the other hand we withstand the temptation, the republic will be the stronger for this exercise of moral force, we shall continue in at least one respect to set an example to the nations, we shall move on further and further along the lines of our appointed task, to show how liberty may be

guarded at home and how it may be protected in the great world outside.

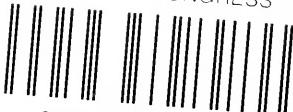
Sometimes ministers say no matter how the problem is settled, they believe the nation will prosper. They say they believe God has yet a work for America to do and that we shall go on as we have gone on. But a minister who reads his Bible should know better. The language reminds me of those in ancient Israel who leaned on Jehovah saying, "Is not Jehovah in the midst of us? No evil can come upon us," whom Micah rebuked. God, the real God, is not indifferent which of two courses we take; he does not take care of us in any case; only if we take the right are we safe, and if we take the other he conducts us to destruction.

It is a sublime call which comes to the American nation to-day. Choose ye whom ye will serve, Mammon or Liberty and Right. Will you conquer races groping upward to freedom and to light, or will you make yourselves friends to them, assisting them, standing guard over them to prevent aggressions from without? The London *Spectator* says that an independent Phillipine republic would in ten years be either English, German or Japanese. That is what we are to prevent. That is why we cannot withdraw from the China Sea and leave the Philippines absolutely to themselves. That is why I am glad that we have the sort of title-deed that we have. The other nations thereby respect us and know that if they interfere they will have someone else to reckon with besides a republic just in its swaddling clothes. We should give the Philippines a chance. We should not impose upon them our civilization (beyond the mere respect for order, which, in the main, indeed, they already have), but let them develop their own civilization. The world is not all of one type, nor need civilization be a stereotyped thing. We should expect the Malays, under fostering influences, to contribute something to the world. Whatever they may absorb from contact with outside peoples let them absorb, but let them run it into their own moulds; let them add in this way to the variety and wonder and

richness of the world. I devoutly hope, I would earnestly pray did I think there was any use in prayer, that America may see where the part of honor and glory really lie, and I can at least beseech you, my hearers, to weigh this whole matter solemnly in your minds, and if you find that you can agree with me, then go among your friends and acquaintances and make converts to your idea, speak in season and out of season, in public and in private about it, for I believe the fate of this nation now trembles in the balance and that action, right action, alone avails.



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